

How many of us have felt uncomfortable in front of our child asking us to know about death? "Why do we die?", "Where do deceased people go?", "Am I going to die too?". These are some of the most common questions a child asks their parents about death. However, this kind of questions, especially in the western world, are perceived as "the forbidden", the unnatural", unattached to life or as "something that will never happen to us". We excluded death from our awareness, but since it is a part of our life we ended up transformed it into our enemy.

Entire generations used to believe that they could "protect" their children from feeling hurt or sorrow if they avoid discussing about death with them. They had put off the idea that death is the limit, that in fact gives our lives a meaning and that "if there was not death in the end, we would not know if we were alive" as the psychoanalyst Françoise Dolto once said.

Additionally death, despite its "controversial nature", is the only certainty and at the same time it is directly associated with life since one leads to the other like the day to night and night to day and like the seasons change to one another.

Nevertheless this could become the most powerful incentive towards creating better conditions for our personal evolution, for learning through the challenges of life, to qualitatively live – whatever a life with quality means for each of us. Besides our mental progress evince the quality of our life. Thus, there is no need for something to last forever as quality is the one that matters, not the quantity.

So, what happens when our child asks us to know about death? We all may have noticed that children's curiosity extends towards everything. Usually from the early childhood, children love to ask questions with simplicity and directness to help themselves understand the world around them. The same goes for death, one of the most taboo subjects. Considering this, parents should dare to creatively deal with the issue as if it is something natural and not to bypass or be content with an answer like "Do not bother about it" or "This is bullshit". An honest answer adapted to the child's age can relieve by far all the misconceptions, fears or worries that have been created around this subject.

Nevertheless, there is not one and only correct answer to this particular question. Every person has different experiences, beliefs, feelings, cultural influences resulting into giving death different meanings. For example, when a child asks "Where do we go when we die," the parent can give infinite answers like saying in heaven, or near God or to say that we are like the leaves of a tree that fall in the fall but they do not die, they go to rest, be mixed and melted into the earth from which they initially came. All this is symbolic such as the fairy tales we read to children or their games. Therefore, every parent can find a different way, according to theirs and the child's temperament, to explain the contest of death.

At any rate, death is a part of life, and children, at some level, are aware of it. They even act it out in their play, often pretending that they die or kill the "bad" guy.

According to Dolto killing in imagination gives real life its whole meaning as death exists only in imagination. So, the child uses its imagination through playing, as another way to "control" and defuse the fear for the unknown.

Death undoubtedly creates anguish and marks a physical separation for all those who are left behind. A loss of a beloved person is like losing a part of ourselves, something we consider to be our own. If we manage to face all this as something natural, we give our children the message that we choose not to see it as an unmitigated tragedy, but rather as something that can help them get prepared for the course of their life. Or as an opportunity to listen, to feel, to express our sorrow or anger or any emotion to one another, without being ashamed to cry or to reveal the intensity of our emotions. By not attempting to keep the child away from all this but by speaking simple and understandable to them, maybe death is not experienced from the angle of a great mourning.

Even the deceased family members never stop to be part of the family's history, in which the child lives. Talking about something, immediately makes it more familiar or more painless and we do not feel "threaten" of it. When someone "goes" they continue to live through the love we bear for them. Through thinking of them, we keep them "alive" as something beautiful while slowly accepting the fact that they have gone somewhere where we will all go someday.

It is true that when a child asks to know "When we die?" no one can answer them. However we can inspire them to live in the moment as much as possible, as life is the sum of experiences that we encounter and of all these moments we have created for ourselves, when we interact with people, animals and nature. Interacting with your surroundings is the only way to live, feel and understand your place in the world. When this is fulfilled to the maximum -no one can determine when that is- we could assume that life is brought to completion. So here comes a possible answer to our child's question as stated by Dolto: "We die after we have lived our life". And many people happens to know when they reach that moment and like a butterfly they complete their transformation.

Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, who has spent years working with kids, used to give them a very beautiful, almost poetic response that "people are like the cocoon of a butterfly". The cocoon is what we see in the mirror. It is only a temporary home for our true self. When the cocoon suffers irreparable damage, we then die and through it, symbolically speaking, emerges the butterfly. "

Finally, in order to be able to talk to children about this and so many other subjects, which would help them understand the world they live in and all the mysteries of life, we must create an environment open and receptive towards everything they think or feel. An environment in which they can express their anxieties, their doubts, their thoughts as if it is something natural and where we as parents endure to listen, even to the most difficult issues such as death is , without always being able to provide solutions or adequate answers. Recognizing this, we open the path for a personal processing on different topics, like death.

Written by Leda Passali

Email: info@psychotherapeuticsolutions.co.uk